According to the practice and theoretical elaboration, mainly resulting from B. Brecht (1898-1956), epic theatre indicates dramatic art and literature that no longer aims at the actor's and spectator's identification and emotional participation in a performance. Epic theatre seeks to fully engage both thought and perception, exercising actors and spectators in feeling and thinking critically, in an attempt to recover the lost function of social criticism in the theatre. Contrary to a frequent misunderstanding, epic theatre neither disdains nor excludes pleasure and emotion favouring "cold" reflection. Indeed, spectators and actors jointly re-experience the pleasure and enjoyment of concrete thinking and practical criticism, especially where the ability to have fun and the faculty of thinking are deformed and dissociated from one another, as happens in modern society.

Today "epic theatre" is mostly used with reference to B. Brecht and the director E. Piscator (1893-1966), although elements not focussing on identification and stage illusion can be found throughout theatre history and in contemporary dramatic literature and dramaturgy. However, the restricted use of the term "epic theatre" is justified and in some respects, necessary. In most cases, we are dealing with stylistic affinities or revivals that do not imply the specific difference of epic theatre Brecht understands and possibly practices. Brecht repeatedly points out that epic theatre cannot be reduced to an aesthetic category. That is because the issue at stake is not merely that of changing forms of representation. The primary issue is instead that of recovering and rethinking the social function of theatre itself. Epic theatre tries to «outline models of coexistence that succeed in fostering the spectators' capacity to understand their social environment and to intervene both intellectually and emotionally» (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 295).

The concept dates back to the 1920s when Brecht and Piscator experimented with new forms of theatre and radically rethought artistic experience in the face of modern society's complexity, i.e. a reality completely over-determined by mediation and technical/bureaucratic organisation, and therefore inscrutable to the isolated individual. Under such conditions, traditional forms of representation centred on action and characters as subjects of free will can only work if the spectator is asked to «turn a blind eye» (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 256).

These conditions have made a requirement essential for writers, theatre people, and artists in general: the readiness to learn beyond their own fields and surround themselves with experts to be questioned with disorienting questions. If this seems to complicate the matter, Brecht warns us, «it is because it *is* complicated» (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 270).

The naked eye can no longer perceive the complexity of events and phenomena without transversal knowledge, editing, and document constructions. The events that count are now those that occur «behind the events» (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 256). Here traditional forms find themselves spinning around in circles: for example, the old drama based on conflict and dialogue, or characters seemingly reproducing flesh and blood individuals with their reduced range of perception and action. For the first time oil industry, inflation, social struggles, and wars become the object of representation: epic theatre tries to reconstruct the links between the micro and the macro, the near and the far, in space as in time, to investigate upstream causes and downstream effects of apparently only private behaviours and apparently only public issues. From this perspective, a matter that we consider habitual and private such as an eviction (Brecht's example) should be represented as a «mass process»: i.e., as dependent on a conjuncture of factors of mass significance, and «as such of historical importance». The represented object can no longer be a conflict between individuals or within individuals, but a «fabric of social relations between human beings» (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 259).

«Anti-Aristotelian» theatre.
Brecht refers to any art and dramatic literature that utilises identification as a means, or even a central effect or purpose, as "Aristotelian". His criticism is not directly aimed at Aristotle and his *Poetics*, but, whether directly or indirectly, at the modern reception of Aristotle and the social value we have ascribed to identification. Brecht argues that identification, as found in Aristotle, has little in common with its current meaning, i.e., «the individual's identification in fully developed capitalism». (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 241).
Brecht refers to a specific «Aristotelian» theatre of the first decades of the 20th century. After the First World War, in particular, representation forms ranging from naturalism to expressionism recuperate the "forces of destiny" again, even when destiny has clearly turned out to be a human product. As a result, human beings are represented in the only possible way, i.e., victims. Epic theatre and other forms of anti-Aristotelian theatre (to a certain extent thesis plays and agitprop theatre in general) attempt to throw light on these elusive forces of fate, often hidden rather than mysterious. As has happened in the scientific field, Brecht urges theatre and the arts to enlighten the alleged occult powers still ruling in them such as 'destiny' and 'nature'. The purpose is to give the spectators practicable descriptions of social reality that could help them orient themselves. Destiny must be known and represented as far as possible as an entirely human activity. This means that no destiny is "necessary", or just in the sense that at a certain point, one is forced to face it actively rather than simply resign to it.
The question that needs asking is thus: «what processes hide behind the processes, still to be discovered, so that processes as we usually perceive them can appear alien to us?» (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 259). Hence the need to *alienate* to represent reality in a «practicable» way, as Brecht often expresses himself. That means getting to know real conditions from the point of view from which we can change them. Social environment, war, economy, and law are to be presented as practices undertaken by humans, and which can, therefore, be changed by humans (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 232). Whenever something is presented as necessary, obvious or natural, it becomes excusable and finally imperceptible. Epic theatre must succeed in making such trivial observations as «if one cannot pay the rent, one is evicted», sound strange (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 257). «Now it's like this, it's been like this for a long time, but it hasn't always been like this» is as much a guiding formula in the praxis of epic alienation as its inverse: «it doesn't have to continue like that, even if it has always been like that».
To facilitate the perception of differences, Brecht himself contrasts epic theatre to "Aristotelian" theatre, by which he means mostly 19th century bourgeois theatre that has survived in some respects up to the present day. If conventional theatre imitates real action, epic theatre uses narrative modes rather than involving the spectator in a scenic action that places spectators in the position of the observer.
Rather than repeating the oft-heard refrain about epic theatre being based on critical distance versus emotional involvement, it is more useful to clarify the concrete reasons Brecht distrusts traditional scenic illusionism and techniques of emotional identification. Modern bourgeois theatre is primarily based on this representational technique, and starting with the mass media has progressively colonised modern representational techniques almost undisturbed. From journalistic reportage to documentaries, from soap operas to so-called committed movies, identification has remained, to the present day, the primary medium and often the final goal. Brecht's criticism of illusionism does not refer to conventional theatre misleading its spectators into believing that they are experiencing actual reality instead of watching theatre – no illusionism has ever reached such perfection, especially since cinema minimised the illusory power of theatre to primitive levels. Brecht himself had already declared film the most effective means to create illusionism (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 340). Instead, the point was that scenic representation had progressively become a kind of extension of the off-stage experience, i.e., a continuation of dominant stylistic patterns of thought and behaviour by other means. In *this* kind of theatre, spectators are not stimulated to think and feel differently from how they think and feel in everyday life.

Brecht certainly insists on never letting us forget that what happens on the stage *is* theatre. By that, he means more than just showing that the scene is just a scene, and the actors just actors. It is not just about displaying the technical and artistic device. These are more or less on permanent display, even in the most naturalist theatre. Nor is it a kind of metatheatre as found in the romantic theatre and various forms of traditional theatre. It is about using theatre intentionally as one of the many forms of «public outreach» (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 250). Therefore, not omitting, but investing in theatre's rudimentary empirical condition: someone speaks up or shows something to others about matters of public interest. This happens, in any case, by doing theatre. However, something else happens «if you engage in theatre thinking that theatre serves only this purpose» (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 250).

To recover its elementary condition as a form of public communication, Brecht shifts theatre away from its ritual origins, which continue in the modern spectacle as a form of profane worship. Epic theatre no longer has its referent in the feast, whether religious or profane, but in public discourse, the rally, the conference, the lecture, the exercise, and the open-door experiment. Piscator's experiments, says Brecht, transform the audience into a meeting room, the theatre into a «parliament», the public into a «legislative body» dealing with «issues requiring decisions» (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 290).

«Restoring the reality of the theatre as theatre», therefore, is not an aim but a means: it is the «prerequisite for realistic representations of the coexistence of human beings» (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 251). Realism for Brecht does not consist in representing things as they are, ultimately selling visions and narratives in place of facts. Instead, it is about representing things from where they can be changed: how they do not *have to be* by nature or necessity. Brecht rejects the prevailing illusionistic tendency precisely because it prevents this kind of realism, which he calls «plastic» or «dialectical». It does not matter whether this illusionism takes place through naturalistic or abstract-symbolic means; when it happens, the representation takes on a form of persuasive naturalness and the only way to experience it is to be dragged along without «being able to meddle with one's own judgement, imagination and impulses». (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 251).

"Alienation" and its purpose.
Brecht frequently uses a formula to convey the fundamental gesture of epic representation and its realism: «this is how things are now, but they *could* be otherwise»: this possibility, which is always concrete and conditioned by historical circumstances, must be felt all the time. The sense of "nature" and necessity must be continuously undermined. (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 303). It is about making people perceive that there is never only one possibility, but always at least two: the implemented one, and the one that could have been implemented. The other possible action, the one not performed on stage, should be made perceptible to the audience, even if it does not occur on stage. These possibilities are always defined and limited by the concrete context and are never of a general kind. This gesture, «so and not so», should inform every element of epic theatre, the work of the actor in particular, but also the text, the scene, the music (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 302).

This is the aim of the technique Brecht develops against the prevailing identification, what he calls «Verfremdungstechnik», or technique of estrangement: to estrange or alienate something means at first simply «eliminating every element of naturalness, obviousness, making it particular, astonishing, unexpected» (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 355). However, it would be wrong to attribute epic estrangement to other contemporary and later forms of representation, which also present the usual as alien and unusual. Epic estrangement comprises two movements existing in the same gesture: it is a matter of making what was known and evident, incomprehensible and absurd, «but only in order to make it even more comprehensible» (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 35). For example, while Dadaism and Surrealism do in fact use forms of estrangement, they limit them to the first movement: they make something known incomprehensible but «never come back from this estrangement» (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 364).

The core estranging attitude consists of an elementary fact: the actor turns to the spectator all the time, in everything he does, «eye to eye». As if implying in gestures and tones: «pay attention to what you see», «have you seen?», «what do you think?». (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 407). In this sense, from Brecht's point of view, the monologues and "asides" of traditional theatre are not yet satisfactory means of estrangement because «they do not fully address the audience» (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 345), i.e., the actors do not exit their role and the story, instead, they draw the audience as accomplices into it.

According to Brecht's classic example, a typical scene of "everyday theatre" can convey a concrete idea of how epic theatre works, what it gives importance to, and what it does not care about: simply imagining how the witness of a car accident would tell a group of bystanders what had just happened, even through mimicking. He would leave out all the details not useful to clarify the dynamics and show where it would have been possible to act differently. He would certainly not try to credibly identify himself, nor would he make his listeners identify with what he is saying. The point is not to reproduce what happened as happening now, on the contrary. The point is precisely to insist on the "repetitive character" so that what happened and is being reported appears neither inevitable nor unchangeable.

The key means of estrangement is the gesture of showing, as it can be found at first in daily practice when one person shows another the behaviour of a third person, for example, making fun of him/her. This typically happens in a practical, involving way, but without illusionism (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 134). Showing also *how* something is being shown, not just what is shown is the question. The *how* should not be confused with the mere *fact* of showing: it is not just about once again doing a kind of metatheatre. Here the character's attitude and the actor's attitude towards him enter a polarisation, placing it under the spectator's scrutiny. Actors observe with amazement what they play and enter into contradiction with the roles. This is the basic attitude Brecht requires from them. The spectator is intentionally placed in the same position.

Therefore, Brecht distances himself from the method of the Russian director Kostantin Sergeevich Stanislavskij who notoriously focuses on identification and emotional involvement. However, this is not to argue that Brecht completely disdains identification as a technique. If anything, in a certain sense, he expands it: «The interpreter must not only impersonate his character, or not so much, but also and above all his relationship with the other characters» (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 346). The interpreter does not identify with this or that personality, but with the relationship between the forces at play, subjective and objective, psychic and social. The actor who narrates the scene while mimicking it combines the story and his comment, the emotion and at the same time the investigation of the emotion, the character's attitude and his attitude towards it. He involves the public in this kind of editing operation rather than easy "human participation". More than playing a role, the epic actor, as Brecht often points out, *quotes* him. He does not actually play the part; he rather refers to it in front of his spectators. The gesture is precisely that of making something present: a text, a line, a behaviour (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 351). He refers to characters in the third person ("she said" / "he said"), recounts dialogues in indirect speech, presents events happening now on stage as happening in the past, pronounces stage directions during the performance.

That is to say we never lose sight of the rudimentary condition of doing theatre, the fact that we generally refer to something that has already happened, often a text that has been written. Epic theatre makes no effort to disguise this. It does not simulate a present, an event on stage, no saying and facts are contemporary to themselves. Instead, the performance becomes the very process of questioning what really happened, despite what seems to have happened, and how it relates to the present in which it is now exposed.

If Brecht places an action in the historical past, as in *Life of Galileo*, he does so to observe the present social system from the point of view of a different social system. In this way, present-day barbarism may be perceived as normality, or even as progress, and continuities that seemed unthinkable can be brought into greater focus. In this sense, says Brecht, the

actor behaves like a historian, and the same attitude is triggered in the spectator: but the processes and «the behaviours he has to alienate are those of the present time» (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 347).

Gestus *in place of dramatic action.*
The point is to destroy any appearance or ideas of inexorability, naturalness, normality, at the bottom of which there is a myth, which is also a gnoseological paradigm, that of "organic growth": using the technique of assembly, showing instead, the suture lines and the construction of any apparent "nature" and "normality".
From the dramaturgical point of view, this purpose implies breaking drama's classic construction into five acts, the unity of time, place, and action, and the tight development that makes scenes follow each other in cause-effect sequences. This seemingly binding connection is the deception Brecht most ardently wished to thwart.
As the critic Walter Benjamin observed, epic theatre is, first of all, an attempt to make human action possible once again in a time when it has become impossible (Benjamin 1999, *Der Autor als Produzent, Gesammelte Werke II-2*, p. 699). What really happens now are processes and procedures "behind the events". Under such conditions, actions and subjects' intentions, like those of the protagonists of traditional theatre, are only possible as long as we blatantly negate our context. Epic theatre tries to face this context and to reconstruct what Aristoteles calls «action» (Benjamin, 1999, *Der Autor als Produzent, Gesammelte Werke II-2*, p. 699), starting from the minimal elements of behaviour: what Brecht calls «Haltung», attitude, «Gestus», or «social gesture» (→ gesto). They are not to be confused with actors' gesture and mimicry: they cannot be traced back to gesture and attitude in their usual sense, and, contrary to what is often said, not even to the concept of *habitus* as found in modern sociology. «Attitudes» and gestures are not just manifestations of ways of thinking and feeling that betray someone's role and social status. All of this belongs to empirical gesture and is typical of theatre, but «Gestus», as Brecht understands it, is not only the expression of a social position but, if anything, of social impact: «gestus» exposes the concrete consequences of certain behaviours and of certain ways of thinking in a concrete context, beyond aims and intentions.
Brecht elaborates and extracts gestures out of a one-liner, music, images: not only bodies, therefore, but also words, text, music, sets, drawings, or film projections are made gestural, so that the real reach of actions and behaviours in concrete situations can be exposed: «the purpose of estrangement is to estrange the social gesture that lies beneath all events» (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 346). Stage conflict, action development, i.e., *drama* in the commonly understood sense, are only the medium through which the real dialectic occurs. Brecht captures this real dialectic with lightning speed, as Benjamin says, «in the gesture of a situation» (Benjamin 2003, p. XXX): not in this or that action, not in the expression of this or that character, but in the consequences they have in the situation.

The "gestural" value of the text.
Some say that Brecht's epic theatre would be the last attempt and experiment in the grand style of literary theatre, meaning both that it makes use of the text as a crucial theatrical element, and that it uses traditional dramatic literature (Lehmann 1993 / 1994, p. 17). For Brecht, however, it is not a question of "saving" (Lehmann 1993/1994, p. 17) literary theatre, but of rediscovering the theatricality of the word by learning to use its "gestural charge". In fact, the gestural use of language qualifies Brecht's epic theatre with respect to the opponents of the "theatre of speech", but also with respect to Mejerchol'd's, to Artaud's avant-garde theatre, the Futurists, the Surrealists, and the Expressionists. There is no doubt that Brecht recognises the primacy and autonomy of theatre from dramatic literature. He even considers this autonomy to be irreversible technical progress of modern theatre. Yet, he also realises that this progress, if left to itself, risks becoming, as has often happened, a fatal hindrance for theatre itself: whenever we rely on the autonomy of theatre, we do basically nothing else but «exhibit the means of production all the time, without actually

using them» (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 223). Therefore, it is necessary not to underestimate any means and tricks that can interfere in this theatre tendency, as Brecht often says, to "theatricalise everything". The gestural use of texts, of the word, among other things, is one of these snags. Only by extracting and exposing the «gestural content» of a story, of a situation, can the real point, the concrete attitudes in the above sense, be played off «*against the material itself*» (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 223). Without the linguistic material from which and against which the «Gestus» can be extracted with precision, one easily falls back into the cult of lived experience, fumbling in the confusion of emotion left to itself and mystical devotion to a presumedly pure body with its epiphanic gestures.

Once elaborated in such a way as to bring the gestural value to the surface, for Brecht, the text is as theatrical as the other means which, in turn, need to be made gestural. The text is never a bible, but for this reason, it cannot even be reduced to a pretext. It is never about illustrating a text on stage, rather about each time constructing the contact point with the historical situation in which it is being received. In this sense, the text demands, orders, a gestural reworking. Brecht himself provided it continuously, in dealing with his own texts as well as those of tradition. Philological fidelity can never be the point – the point is the contact and critical impact with one's times. All art and stage elements must concentrate on this.

The «separation of the elements» or mutual estrangement of all the languages on stage.
All the means and languages on stage work in synergy, but not to provide an all-round performance (the ideal of a "total work of art "): on the contrary, in epic theatre they are used in full autonomy with a function of mutual estrangement. Scenography does not illustrate action; it comments on it. Compared to traditional prose theatre, this theatre makes wide use of music and does not use it with an expressive and psychologising function as it has been, and continues to be, used in cinema today. This, Brecht notes, is a typical contemporary deviation inflicted on music and has not always been the case. He cites Mozart as an example of non-introspective music that expresses men's socially relevant attitudes (tenderness, envy, greed, competition, etc.). «Even where music and word are simultaneous, they should be able to be heard separately: the word must remain comprehensible [...], the music must be autonomous, not subordinate to the text». Instead, music must show a clear attitude towards the text, extract the gesture, «comment on it or relativise it» (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 151).

Brecht calls this autonomous use of the various means, action, text, music, scenography, a «separation of the elements», but, obviously, in a way that brings them into critical tension with each other (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 291). This points to another less emphasised, but crucial aspect of epic theatre: the high critical level of collective work that it implies. This collective work radically transforms the production practice from realising the director's "vision" to dialectical *work-in-progress*. This concerns not only staging but the prior construction of the dramas. During the collaboration between Brecht and Piscator. For example, though this was a practice Brecht more or less always maintained, an entire staff of playwrights worked together on the same drama and consulted a handful of experts including historians, economists, sociologists, and statisticians (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 291).

The spectator as Observer.
Brecht does not hide the fact that he was partly responsible for certain simplifications, which, as also happened in Italy, had more success than the epic theatre itself. In the early days of epic theatre, Brecht stressed its difference from traditional theatre to the extent that they end up sounding almost as opposites. The purpose was to make the shift of emphasis clearly perceptible. However, he soon regretted how this impacted epic theatre's reception: it made it appear rationalistic, exhausting, cold – a theatre where the spectator is kept at a critical distance, and only intellectuals, primarily "ideological" sympathisers, could have fun and enjoy themselves.

Brecht repeatedly pointed out what this critical distance, the real novelty of epic theatre, consisted of. The real meaning of this distance was also easily misunderstood since it was traced back to the neutrality of those who, *super partes,* watched from the outside. Epic theatre aims instead at undermining the widespread and stubborn belief in the possibility of neutral knowledge: there is no "objective" knowledge without taking a position in the order of things, without intervening as a force at play, emphasising this or that aspect, or favouring one development rather than another. Here the spectator is neither dropped into a scenario nor safely placed in an imaginary external environment: instead of making him «sink into the action», every effort is directed at «putting him in front of it» [«gegenübersetzen»], in the sense of making him face and deal with what is exposed on stage as when one is forced to handle something from which one cannot back out (Brecht 1967, 17, p. 1009).

This critical attitude of the spectator is not to be understood, even if this is done so continuously, as limited to a kind of rationalism, calculation, neutrality, of a scientific point of view: on the contrary, «it must be an artistic, productive, enjoyable attitude» (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 275). Therefore, Brecht means an active, enterprising, inventive, and thus cheerful attitude, not at all self-restrained and cold, and consequently, in no way inferior to the cathartic effect described by Aristotle (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 273). Therefore, it is not merely a question of making the spectators' critical attitude possible, but of «organising» and promoting their ability to contradict, not only regarding what is represented but also towards how it is represented.

The use of emotions.
The epic scene is not devoid of emotions. However, their function is not to bring about some kind of Aristotelian catharsis, nor, as the entertainment and advertising industry already did in Brecht's time, to excite the spectator's emotions, anaesthetised as they were by the incessant small *shocks* of modern life. «Epic theatre does not fight emotions at all, but examines them without merely providing them». (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 277): emotions need to be studied while they are aroused and experienced. It is a question of contemporaneously feeling and understanding what is felt, why it is felt, and what effect, whether harmful or not, these specific emotions have in the context.

Therefore, anti–Aristotelian dramatic art will avoid the false universalism of emotions passed off as the eternal heritage of humanity, a sort of *koinè* of all times and all peoples, on which a large part of art and the entertainment industry is based. It will start instead immediately from the historical and social root of emotions. According to Brecht, the entertainment industry uses nervous excitement and identification as a functional technique to stimulate our interest in things that are not even in our interest. The fact that they only work if the complexity and conflictual nature of reality is left out speaks volumes about their effects. For such emotion and involvement to occur, we must close our eyes and, rather than imagine more, imagine less (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 469). That is to say, in psychoanalytic jargon, we must remove and deny the reality around us.

These emotional discharges are used precisely to overwhelm and silence the critical capacity. It is, instead, possible, and absolutely recommendable from Brecht's point of view, to provoke emotions that support and nourish critical capacity. It is thus not the purpose or effect of epic theatre to separate thought and emotion. Rather, this is a presumption that recent theatrical tradition and entertainment generally have in common: they both believe that the psyche can be dissected and separated from thinking, that emotion, feeling and the entire spheres of the intellect and reason can be separated and even opposed to each other. It can be said without paradox that in epic theatre the point is not so much to avoid involving the spectators as to *involve them fully*: it is not a question of choosing between emotion and critical sense, thereby extinguishing part of the spectator's psychic faculties, but, on the contrary, of bringing emotions and feelings to the point where they become "knowledge".

In what sense is epic theatre pedagogical and in what sense is it political.
A peculiar political-pedagogical dimension differentiates epic theatre and makes it a *unicum*. As seen above, this dimension needs to be strictly understood in the sense of exercise and verification of an attitude in a specific situation, and not, as is always misunderstood and dismissed, as a lesson on ideas or a campaign of persuasion delivered from on high.

The pedagogical value of epic theatre consists in «presenting the world as an object of human praxis», rather than destiny or necessity we can only either accept or oppose in an act of aesthetic rebellion as a certain «machismo» in expressionist theatre does (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 346).

The opposition between learning and having fun is historical. It has not always been, and it does not always have to be. Brecht frequently points out how, in the Enlightenment aesthetics (Lessing, Diderot or Schiller), the function of fun and the educational and pedagogical function presuppose each other. Only in the contemporary age, when learning, knowing, understanding, and enjoying are systematically compromised, do these two functions dissociate and even come into conflict: knowing stops being a pleasure, and pleasure finds itself made wholly passive. (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 292). If in epic theatre it is a matter of learning, it is still a question of a «funny, cheerful, combative» (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 267): «theatre remains theatre even when it is pedagogical theatre, and as long as it is funny theatre, it is good theatre» (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 266).

Brecht himself clears up the most typical and trivial misunderstandings regarding epic theatre, including the idea that it is an intellectualistic conception dropped down from on high; the opposite is true. In a practice that had been ongoing for several years, epic theatre fully developed on stage, struggling with the concrete problems regarding the effectiveness of representation. The aversion to the role of critical thought and theoretical reflection comes from what Brecht calls a «primitive misunderstanding» (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 276), namely exchanging theory with ideology. Here it is not a question of using theatre to promulgate ideas (ideology), but of thinking of ways to return an active social function to theatre (and the other arts).

This theatre is political not because it makes propaganda, but because it is an illusion to be a-political. Brecht continuously shows how any form of art, thought, or communication cannot help but be political because it always "behaves", it always ends up taking a position despite itself, and always has more or less visible consequences in the context in which it is received. Epic theatre tries to take responsibility for this position as much as possible, to promptly answer, and to change it if necessary. On the other hand, it is not political in the sense that it promotes or incites action as agitprop theatre does (Brecht partly distances himself from Piscator's theatre because he felt it slid towards this typical understanding of the political dimension, which, while necessary in some cases, rarely gets to the root of problems).

Brecht's point is that even «Aristotelian» theatre moves from underlying theses that have political consequences that remain unseen since they are mostly tacit and shared. For example, traditional theatre «presupposes knowing what a human being is», takes this as «immutable», and of a «fixed size» (Brecht 1967, 17, pp. 1009-10). Similarly, it takes the idea that «thought determines being» for granted (Brecht 1967, 17, p. 1010), that the world is a matter of ideas, and that it is enough to change thinking or perspective to change so-called reality. Epic theatre exposes these submerged ideological assumptions and questions them, doing so based on opposing theses: it treats people not as something known but as «objects of study», not only «susceptible to change» but also «to be changed» (Brecht 1967, 17, pp. 1009-10). Epic theatre can be called rational theatre only insofar as it continually clarifies its aims and assumptions, rather than uncritically accepting handed down practices and functions. It derives its means and technical expedients (which can change and are constantly tested) from these aims and presuppositions. Thus, epic theatre may be called tendentially Marxist, not because it tries to convert to communism, but primarily because it tries to exercise dialectical thought and perception as radicalised by K. Marx; in other words, it attempts to raise consciousness about how much our social being determines our

way of thinking and, consequently, how necessary it is to intervene directly in social being in order to change our ways of thinking. This does not imply caving into social determinism (Brecht criticises this drift of naturalist theatre). On the contrary, it is a question of realising that knowledge and criticism of ideas alone are not sufficient to change our behaviour: in order to do that, we need to intervene in the situations, spaces, and historical-material structures that make certain behaviours possible and discourage or even make others unthinkable. It is no coincidence that already in the 1930s, Brecht indicated his preference for the term «dialectical theatre» rather than «epic theatre», even if he postponed its adoption to a time when dialectics will be possibly applied in full, not only on stage but also off stage, to society as a whole.

Background, influences, and perspectives.
From a stylistic point of view, there is no doubt that forms of epic theatre can be found throughout the history of dramatic art. However, this argument is gladly used by detractors to conceal the point where epic theatre confronts us with an undeniable novelty. Brecht and Piscator themselves insist on including epic theatre in a history of precedents in order to avoid its novelty being reduced to a mere issue of style or fashion.
Brecht pointed out that, «from a strictly stylistic point of view», epic devices could already be found in the theatre of the past, both western and eastern: he mentions the Medieval Mysteries, classical Spanish theatre, and Jesuit theatre (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 1, 272). But traces can also be found in the Commedia dell'Arte, Attic tragedy, Shakespearean theatre, the drama of *Sturm und Drang* and *Vormärz*, the works of C.D. Grabbes and G. Büchner, and Goethe's *Faust*. Another stylistic forerunner and fundamental reference point for Brecht is ancient Asian, Chinese and Japanese theatre. Brecht admired the significant role of gestures, impersonal representation, and the «exhibition nature» of the performance, i.e. illusionism reduced to a minimum thanks to sparse decoration and the numerous interruptions. Brecht was aware of Chinese theatre through the exponents of contemporary Russian theatre, particularly his friend S. Tret'jakov, who imported suggestions and ideas from China. Further opportunities for direct comparison are also found in W.E. Mejerchol'd, who experimented after the October revolution with alienating expedients similar to those we can find in Brecht and Piscator in Moscow: moving stages, projection of films, open-stage scenographic changes. The same concept of estrangement has precursors among the formalists of the Russian avant-garde, at least in a general sense. The "ostranenenie" (остранение) of which V. Šklovskij speaks as early as 1916, is aimed at revitalising a fossilized poetic language with irritating and unexpected expedients, interrupting the predictable guidelines of the automatic and the known. Brecht, however, as we have seen, radicalises and at the same time clarifies the function of "ostranenenie": beyond the generic purpose of blowing up usual perception, epic estrangement sets out to discover new insight into what seems understandable and taken for granted, so that new knowledge can lead to different behaviour.
Stimuli to the elaboration of the concept and practice of epic theatre also come from outside the performing arts: from A. Döblin's montage novel and L. Feuchtwanger's "dramatic novel", with whom Brecht made a version of the *Life of Edward the Second of England* in 1923, already applying such epic means as the loosening of cohesion in the succession of scenes, and a general stage direction counteracting the illusionistic drift.
Direct influences Brecht mentioned are the cabaret-style and F. Wedekind's *Bänkelsang* (the art of storytelling). However, more than any other was Karl Valentin, the famous Munich cabaret artist of the 1920s, with whom the young Brecht collaborated. Like much avant-garde theatre, Piscator and Brecht's epic theatre also drew heavily on the typically loose and irreverent forms expressed towards the public and show business in the minor arts, such as cabaret, magazines, fairs, even the circus, the *Songs* culture of nightclubs, and political storytellers.
Piscator technically revolutionised the theatre of the 1920s, using multiple stages showing different actions simultaneously, conveyor belts, turntables or moving bridges, projected

images, and films to comment and interact with the performance. Brecht, who collaborated with Piscator in Berlin in the 1920s (memorable in this regard is their version of J. Hašek's *Good Soldier Sc'vèjk* of 1928), took care of epic dramaturgy and acting while attributing the development of the stage apparatus to Piscator. However, Brecht did express some reservations that Piscator's political theatre would use epic elements in a way that risked reducing them to the same effects of identification and involvement of traditional theatre.

Also significant is the influence that seems to have resulted from the encounter with opera from as early as 1926 with the modern opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*. Until 1956, the year of Brecht's death, there were a total of more than twenty projects that attempted to innovate the genre.

Although T. Mann, in a lecture in 1933 (Mann 1976, p. 85), or T.W. Adorno (Adorno 2012, pp. 141-160) recognise an «epic» character in the work of R. Wagner. In particular, in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, Brecht sees Wagner's work and conception of «total work of art» («Gesamtkunstwerk») as the "enemy" par excellence, basically as the vanishing point of the mystifying idea of art as well as of industrial spectacle in contemporary society, proving once again that a form of theatre can also be epic from a purely stylistic point of view. Yet, it is precisely for this reason that it contradicts the full horizon and function of epic theatre as understood by Brecht.

Brecht heavily criticised opera as a whole for its illustrative and "Aristotelian" use of the theatrical apparatus, only intended to stimulate audiences emotionally. However, he also finds a mine of epic elements in opera. Indeed, it has been possible to detect «the illegitimate children of the opera» (Calico 2019, p. 3) in both epic and modernist theatre. Scholars also recognise affinities in the proposals for reform of traditional opera by the composer F. Busoni, who, not by chance, was a maestro of the composer K. Weill, an assiduous Brecht collaborator. Busoni criticised the illustrative use of music, promoted public activation, and insisted that neither the artists nor the audience degrade artistic pleasure by exchanging it for "human participation". The performer, the artist, must «play music, play, act (the many simultaneous meanings of the English word "play" and the German "*spielen*"), not relive. The spectator must remain lucid, without being prevented from either intellectual reception or subtle enjoyment» (Busoni 1916, p. 59).

Today great and famous directors, such as Claus Peymann, former director of the Berliner Ensemble, Peter Brook, Armin Petras, see Brecht as a «key figure of our time». «Every work today comes from his observations and his production or returns to it», admits Brook (1968, p. 80), even if this remains more of a hope than a fact. Yet, whatever the case may be, this applies more to European theatre beyond the Alps than Italian theatre.

In general, it can be said that since Brecht's death, wherever it has been revived, epic theatre has mostly been formalistic or largely deprived of its political-pedagogical element, misinterpreting it in the propaganda-agitprop sense seen above (see the aesthetic-civic reduction made in Italy by G. Strehler's mediation since the 1950s). Today, for example, while the German composer and director H. Goebbels finds a specific and declared point of reference in epic theatre, and his staging of E. Canetti's *Eraritjaritjaka* applies the separation, or mutually alienating tension between the different means operated by Brecht, he nevertheless complains that this separation is «not aesthetic enough» (Raddatz 2007, p. 124s).

H. Müller (1926-1995), considered Brecht's critical heir par excellence, was perhaps the only one to take up the «gestural principle» after the war, radicalising it in his dramatic and scenic writing, and using the text thus «gesturalised» as a hindrance to the theatre which tends to «theatricalise everything».

Even on German stages today, overwhelmed by the hasty ideological misunderstanding about epic theatre's political dimension, serious confrontation with Brecht seems to be waning. It is a convenient misunderstanding for the aesthetics of psychological illusionism and the universal Human, as noted by the German director R. Pollesch, referring to a trend found in established theatres, not only in Germany.

Strictly speaking, and not just as an aesthetic category, epic theatre seems to have no direct successors today. As things stand at present, a future for epic theatre could lie more in cinema than theatre (apart from L. von Trier and J.M. Straub - D. Huillet among others, there have been a few examples of this so far).

While acknowledging the influence silent films on epic theatre, Brecht was well-aware of epic theatre's potential contribution to film, especially after introducing sound allowed cinema to conceal its editing techniques and critical potential as much as possible, reverting to naturalistic-mimetic narration and emotional cleansing. Whether epic theatre can be performed anywhere and at any time, Brecht himself once answered that, from a stylistic perspective, it has always been present in history. However, what is neither always nor everywhere is societies' willingness to «deal with their problems» through theatre, particularly «in order to solve them» and not merely discuss them (Brecht 1967, 15, p. 272). Even in Brecht's time, most of the great nations were certainly not inclined to do so («London, Paris, Tokyo, and Rome use their theatres for other purposes», Brecht 1967, 15, p. 272). Only in some places, and not for long, was this possible, Berlin of the 1920s being one of these. However, epic theatre probably never recovered from the sharp setback following the rise of fascism. Therefore, societies' willingness to engage in a public confrontation with their problems is both an extra-aesthetic prerequisite and a goal. If this social interest does not exist, epic theatre is reduced to one style among many. The only alternative is, as Brecht claims, to experiment with alternative ways to pursue this interest.

This brings Brecht towards the end of the 1920s, close to the Nazi rise to power and the theory and praxis of the *Lehrstücke*. Roughly translated into Italian as "drammi didattici", perhaps more appropriately with *learning plays* into English, this work can be considered the culmination of epic theatre research, a path interrupted by Nazism and exile and never really taken up again. These *Lehrstücke* are no longer intended for staging, and therefore no longer require an audience, nor, in reality, even professional actors, even if, *a priori*, they do not exclude the possible presence of either. These are texts designed as exercise tools for anyone ready to use them. While using theatrical techniques and instruments such as acting, mimicry, scene and scripts, they do not aim at doing theatre. It is no longer a question of a performance, of doing art. Works of art, performance, art itself are certainly not outlawed; they are simply no longer the point. The point is to exercise dialectical thinking, productive criticism, «social gesture», in the sense seen above.

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[MILENA MASSALONGO]